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First Thoughts

When my children were born the act of following a poem through from start to finish in one place became a thing of the past. Learning to use the notebook as a safe deposit box—a place to put half an image or a fraction of a line for safekeeping—was vital and helpful.

Eavan Boland

Keeping a notebook is the single best way I know to survive as a writer. It encourages you to pay attention to your world, inside and out. It serves as a container to keep together all the seeds you gather until you're ready to plant them. It gives you a quiet place to catch your breath and begin to write.

In his book *Freedom to Learn* Carl Rogers suggests the need for a college course on the caring and feeding of infant ideas: "Creative thoughts and actions are just like infants: unprepossessing, weak, easily knocked down. A new idea is always very inadequate compared to an established one."

Most of my ideas for poems, stories, novels, or essays sound pretty iffy (pretty awful) at their earliest stage; I suspect this is true for most writers. But those early rumblings, farfetched visions, the faint scratchings of the imagination, are crucial for a writer who hopes to create something original. How do you keep those ideas alive until you're ready to use them?

A notebook can work as a safe haven for your infant ideas in exactly the way Rogers suggests. It gives you a place to incubate very new ideas before they are strong and mature enough to face

the harsh light of rational judgment, let alone public scrutiny. And it's an ideal place for the very brief writing stretches most of us have to squeeze into our frenetic lives.

Many writers use some form of notebook and consider it an essential part of their creative process. The nomenclature, however, can get confusing. Some writers talk interchangeably about a *journal*, *diary*, *sketchbook*, *notebook*, or *daybook*; others make subtle distinctions between these terms. I met one school-girl who spoke enthusiastically about her *lifebook*. For simplicity and consistency I have opted for the generic term *writer's notebook*.

That's what this book is about: *What is the writer's notebook? How do writers use it? What makes it tick?* I draw from my own notebook entries as well as the notebook entries of other writers. In this way I have tried to show a range of possibilities. When one of my entries rubs shoulders with an entry by an F. Scott Fitzgerald or other literary luminary, I hope you will forgive my temerity. I include selections from my notebook not as examples of immortal writing but in the spirit of revealing the "displayed self" of the writer whose innermost workings I know best.

I consider metaphors crucial tools to help readers get a feel for any subject, particularly one as amorphous as the writer's notebook. This book puts forth a profusion of metaphors. Grab the most helpful ones and ignore the rest.

The book's title illuminates two basic aspects of the writer's notebook. *Breathing In* refers to the way the notebook serves as a container for selected insights, lines, images, ideas, dreams, and fragments of talk gathered from the world around you. In this way it gets you into the habit of paying closer attention to your world. *Breathing Out* suggests that the notebook is a fine place from which to take what you have collected and use it to spark your own original writing.

Although the chapters at the beginning of the book tend to focus on breathing in (collecting) and the latter chapters on breathing out (generating), many chapters explore both aspects

of the notebook. A breath, breathe in without breathing helps you find a natural rhythm in your writing life.

I very nearly titled this book *How to Write a Notebook*, the title of a commencement address I gave at Wellesley College. I liked the sound of it. I want for this book: the convenience of a notebook and intimate. And first person. I want to get into the nature of the writer's notebook as a no-strings-attached gift to you.

"Our notebooks give us a voice," says the author of *Writing Towards Bethlehem*, "for here we see around us, the common world, and we see it transparently, shamelessly, truthfully."

Your notebook is a room where you can inhabit that first person point of view. It provides a safe place for you to write about what you care about. What moves the dream? What do you remember for the rest of my life? How might I begin?

First person also touches on the heart of a young writer I dreamed of. I dreamed of a book. Any book. Rereading it, I found it the first, most important audience for my writing. During the lean years before I had a notebook gave me a writing place where I never got grace. It gave me a place to develop the habit of writing seriously. Writing in my notebook was a real pleasure in what I put down. It was a spirit on the enjoyment derived from writing.

This book is for new writers who have used to write but stopped writing. It is for people who loved to write at one time but

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of the notebook. A breath, after all, has two parts; you can't breathe in without breathing out. It's my hope that this book helps you find a natural rhythm for using a notebook in your writing life.

I very nearly titled this book *First Person*, borrowed from the title of a commencement address Anna Quinlan gave at Wellesley College. I liked that. First person suggests the tone I want for this book: the conversational "I" of a writer, up close and intimate. And first person also offers a revealing glimpse into the nature of the writer's notebook itself. The notebook is a no-strings-attached gift to the I/eye.

"Our notebooks give us away," Joan Didion writes in *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*, "for however dutifully we record what we see around us, the common denominator of all we see is always, transparently, shamelessly, the implacable 'I.'"

Your notebook is a room of your own. It encourages you to inhabit that first person pronoun fully and without apology. It provides a safe place for you to ask: *What do I notice? What do I care about? What moves the deepest part of me? What do I want to remember for the rest of my life? What do I want to write about? How might I begin?*

First person also touches on the question of the audience. As a young writer I dreamed of seeing my name on the cover of a book. Any book. Rereading my notebooks, I now see that the first, most important audience for my writing has always been me. During the lean years before I had published anything, my notebook gave me a writing arena. A safe, nonthreatening place where I never got graded, laughed at, or rejected. It gave me a place to develop the habits of a writer, to take my work seriously. Writing in my notebook, I discovered that I could take real pleasure in what I put down on paper, could sustain my spirits on the enjoyment derived from working my craft.

This book is for new writers, but it is also for those of us who used to write but stopped writing. I have talked with many people who loved to write at one time in their lives but now find

themselves in a world where they write only memos, briefs, or advertisements. Somewhere along the way they lost their love of writing.

Have you forgotten when writing was fun? When your writing had zest and nerve? When the words you wrote cut so close to your heart it pounded as your hands formed the letters?

First person: writing for yourself, for the pleasure you take in the craft. This reminds me of a poem by David Fisher about a circus bear:

The Bear

Thrown from the boxcar of the train, the bear rolls over and over. He sits up rubbing his nose. This must be some mistake,

there is no audience here.

He shambles off through the woods.

* * *

The forest is veined with trails,
he does not know which to follow.

The wind is rising, maple leaves turn up
their silver undersides in agony, there is a
smell in the air, and the lightning strikes.
He climbs a tree to escape. The rain
pours down, the bear is blue as a gall.

* * *

There is not much to eat
in the forest, only berries,
and some small delicious animals
that live in a mound and bite your nose.

* * *

The bear moves sideways through a broom-straw field.
He sees the hunters from the corner of his eye
and is sure they have come to take him back.
To welcome them, (though there is no calliope)
he does his somersaults, and juggles

a fallen log, and something
tears through

he shambles away in the fore
Do they not know who he is

* *

After a while, he learns to fish in the deep pool and wait for the fish. He learns to keep his paw up and not to let it fall. There is only one large animal on its head, that he cannot see.

* *

At last he is content to be
alone in the forest,
though sometimes he finds a
and solemnly does his tricks
though no one sees.

A notebook can be a place where you can be alone with your thoughts, a place where you can explore, imagine, and wonder, details and textures, colors and textures, and subplots, perceptions and feelings. A notebook will encourage you to write, to explore, to that nourish your writing life. It will be a place where you can be a writer in you. You won't find it in these pages. But if you have a notebook, you can start of keeping a writer's notebook. It's a good start.

Breathing Out

they write only memos, briefs, or
along the way they lost their love
writing was fun? When your writ-
the words you wrote cut so close
r hands formed the letters?
self, for the pleasure you take in
a poem by David Fisher about a

train, the bear

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rner of his eye
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e is no calliope)
gles

First Thoughts

a fallen log, and something
tears through his shoulder,
he shambles away in the forest and cries.
Do they not know who he is?

* * *

After a while, he learns to fish, to find
the deep pool and wait for the silver trout.
He learns to keep his paw up for spiderwebs.
There is only one large animal, with trees
on its head, that he cannot scare.

* * *

At last he is content to be
alone in the forest,
though sometimes he finds a clearing
and solemnly does his tricks,
though no one sees.

A notebook can be a clearing in the forest of your life, a
place where you can be alone and content as you play with out-
rage and wonder, details and gossip, language and dreams, plots
and subplots, perceptions and small epiphanies. I hope this
book will encourage you to start a notebook and use it in ways
that nourish your writing life. I hope it helps reawaken the
writer in you. You won't find any clever formulas or neat recipes
in these pages. But if you have ever been intrigued by the idea
of keeping a writer's notebook, this book will give you a place to
start.